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AUTHOR Coats, Lowell S.
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ABSTRACT

Phase-elective programs in English enable students to become involved in making curriculum choices. In an evaluation of the elective programs offered in the Fort Wayne Community Schools, it was found that (1) seventy percent of the students enjoyed being allowed to pick their own English courses; (2) eighty-eight percent of the students found phase-elective programs to be more to their liking than their previous programs; (3) sixty-three percent of the students felt phase-elective programs had positively affected their attitudes toward English; (4) students in the phase-elective schools were somewhat more positive in their response to language arts classes than were students in the traditional programs; and (5) students in the elective programs felt they were more involved in their curriculum planning. Scores on the Iowa Test of Educational Development over a four-year period indicated a rise of ten points on the English scores above the score for the year prior to the institution of a phase-elective program. Though scheduling continues to be a problem, proponents of the elective programs continue to seek new solutions, for it seems students in these programs have captured a spirit of course election that is positive. (HOD)

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PROMISES AND PROBLEMS IN STUDENT PLANNING VIA PHASE-ELECTIVE ENGLISH

Lowell S. Coats

Psychologist and author Haim Ginott told teacher delegates at the 1973 Annual NEA Convention in Portland, Oregon, that children are the enemy and, as adults, the teachers' task is to make them friends. (NEA Reporter). He said that "In order to make friends with children, the first step is to make children less dependent on adults because dependency inevitably breeds hostility." To diminish hostility by diminishing dependency, Ginott suggested that adults let children make choices. He uses this method in psychotherapy because it gives children confidence in their ability to face life. By letting children make choices, adults are telling children that they think the children are capable of making choices.

Undoubtedly, Dr. Ginott approves of educational programs that give choices to the older children as well as the younger, especially if these programs tend to make those students friends rather than enemies of their adult teachers. The phase-elective program in English certainly qualifies as one that lets students make choices, for the student involvement in planning is a major feature.

Is it because of this factor that the elective program has begun to turn back an at least fifty-year tide of hate against English? John Maxwell, Deputy Executive Secretary of NCTE, said in an address on "Accountability and the Teacher of English" before the November 2nd meeting of the Northeastern Indiana Council of Teachers of

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English that "accountability is the responsibility to provide effective educational programs and to employ efficiently the resources allocated for the purpose." He stated that "those who are deep into the elective curriculum are very much on the side of the angels because they believe in their estimation that it is an effective program in turning back a generation of ages-long - well, at least fifty years worth- of built-up feeling in people that 'I hate English.'" He went on to say, "Our egos can't stand that; and our egos get stumped a little bit by the fact that when we have an elective curriculum, the kids don't have that feeling."

Now that so many schools are planning new phase-elective programs in response, among other things, to the strong student desire to be involved in curriculum decisions that affect them personally, it is well to look at both the promises and problems in student planning via the phase-elective English program.

As I noted in a paper prepared for NCTE last year, Daniel J. Dietrich's NCTE/Eric Summaries and Sources article in the March 1972 English Journal, "Student Unrest and Student Participation in Planning," (pp 443-449), documented the fact that students were even more dissatisfied with the limited degree of participation they were allowed in school policy making than with the political and war involvement situations which they protested through walkouts, sit-ins, boycotts and other means of disapproval. Students have

been demanding a better educational program and climate and want to be involved in planning their programs.

Many educators have been learning lessons from these students, recognizing that people who are involved in making important decisions about their organizations are more likely to increase their learning and commitment to those organizations. In the evaluations of the phase-elective program, in which students have an opportunity at least to plan some of the content and the sequence of their English classes, students generally give high approval to the program. Responding to a questionnaire developed to assess current programs in the Fort Wayne Community Schools in the spring of 1972, students in three senior high schools with phase-elective English programs reacted as follows:

Question: How do you feel about being allowed to pick your own English course?

(a)	dislike very much	0.4%
(b)	dislike	01%
(c)	like	13%
(d)	like much	16%
(e)	like very much	70%

Whether the English program had actually improved as much as students indicated or whether the choice factor affected their reactions are pertinent considerations, but students gave much credit to the new program in response to the following question:

Question: How would you rate the new English curriculum in English in general as compared with previous programs you have experienced?

(a)	much poorer	01%
(b)	poorer	03%
(c)	same	07%
(d)	better	41%
(e)	much better	47%

In other words, 88% of the students responding, for one reason or another, find their phase-elective program more to their liking than their previous programs. One must not overlook the influence of such affective factors as the novelty of change in the response of the students. Nevertheless, there is no mistaking the positive response to the elective program.

I'm pleased that a third of the students polled had had sufficient good experiences in their former program or they were having no worse experiences in the new to cause them to respond to the question asking them to assess their attitude as follows:

Question: How has this course affected your attitude toward English?

(a)	like much less	02%
(b)	like less	04%
(c)	like same	32%
(d)	like more	43%
(e)	like much more	20%

It is worth noting that 63% respond more favorably to their new program than to the old. I think this vividly supports John Maxwell's observation that the elective program is turning back that long established built-up feeling of hating English.

In response to a similar question in a questionnaire administered to students in all six Fort Wayne Community Schools high schools, four with phase-elective programs and two with traditional, students in the phase elective schools were somewhat more positive in their response than were students in the traditional program.

Question: I enjoy my language arts class.

	Phase-Elective	Non-Phase Elective
5 - Excellent	18%	13%
4 - Very good	27%	21%
3 - Acceptable or generally true	28%	24%
2 - Fair or occasionally true	14%	24%
1 - Poor or missing	11%	18%

The teachers may have been a little more optimistic than the students in the favorable way they thought - or hoped - students reacted to their language arts classes.

Question: Students react favorably to their language arts classes.

	Phase-Elective	Non-Phase Elective
5 - Excellent	20%	12%
4 - Very good	49%	31%
3 - Acceptably or generally true	27%	41%
2 - Fair or occasionally true	04%	08%
1 - Poor or missing	00%	04%

Nevertheless, the teachers in the phase elective schools thought that 69% of their students were above average in their reaction to their language arts classes as compared to 43% of the teachers in the non-phase elective schools. Since sophomores in two of the phase-elective schools were still on traditional programs at the time, their reaction would not enhance the phase-elective position. In my previous years as English consultant in FWCS, I had not had teachers come to me when I was visiting a building to tell me, "Teaching has never been like this before; the students are interested and are eager to learn." I do not mean to imply that teachers in our schools had not previously had good experiences in the classroom. However, that none previously had felt thus urged to share their excitement with me made me aware that something different was happening.

Perhaps this is a good place to make some defensive statements about the six Fort Wayne Community Schools high schools in my study. One might well wonder why were not all six rather than just four involved in the phase-elective program. At the time of the survey, one of the two non-phase-elective schools was instituting a block program and felt that was enough experimentation currently. That school does have a new program this year, not a phase-elective one, but one in which students elect year-long strands of well conceived nine-week units. The other non-phase-elective school is in the process of program revision but is not presently planning a phase-elective program. It was one of the schools in the HEW Cooperative English Project #1994 completed in 1966, "A Study of English Programs in Selected High Schools which Consistently Educate Outstanding Students in English." Because I have a long standing intimate knowledge of the schools and the English staffs, I feel that my investigation, although solely on home turf among only six schools, may have some validity.

In a further question in the questionnaire, students in the phase-elective schools though that they were more involved in planning than was acknowledged on a questionnaire administered to teachers. The reverse was true in the schools with the traditional program, where more teachers than students were aware of efforts

to involve students in planning.

Student Question: Students have some opportunity to set goals and select activities in language arts classes.

	Phase-Elective	Non-Phase Elective
5 - Excellent	17%	8%
4 - Very good	32%	14%
3 - Acceptable or generally true	29%	25%
2 - Fair or occasionally true	16%	27%
1 - Poor or missing	6%	25%

Teacher Question: Students are involved in the formulation of goals and the selection of activities.

	Phase-Elective	Non-Phase Elective
5 - Excellent	04%	12%
4 - Very good	26%	23%
3 - Acceptable or generally true	49%	23%
2 - Fair or occasionally true	13%	35%
1 - Poor or missing	09%	08%

Teachers in phase-elective programs should know a common goal in the phase-elective program is to provide more opportunity

for student involvement in planning. However, knowing that the planning involvement is good for students is no special province of phase-elective teachers. Indeed, good teaching takes place wherever one finds the good teacher. A well conceived phase-elective program, nevertheless, may make it possible for the good teacher to be even more effective with students.

The implications of the following study may be either a promise or a wish for the phase-elective English program. In a study to learn what effect the phase-elective program may be having on results of standard achievement tests, Mr. David Platt, assistant principal of R. Nelson Snider High School in Fort Wayne, studied the test results on the English section of the Iowa Test of Educational Development over a four year period, one year before the English department began instituting the phase-elective program and the first three years of the program. I do not intend to invalidate the gross inadequacy of standardized tests, the ITED as well as others, but an examination of the English section of the ITED reveals that it includes certain aspects of English that are readily testable. All careful writers do observe these matters of language mechanics; and English teachers have long drilled their students on them ad nauseum, erroneously calling this an English program just as the testers erroneously claim to be testing

English, or whatever area, when in reality they are only testing selected aspects of that subject area.

At any rate, it is generally understood that it is nearly impossible to move the mean percentile scores of a school appreciably from year to year on the ITED. Nevertheless, the first year of phase elective at Snider the English mean percentile score moved up seven points. However, the following year, the year of integration, new school boundaries, and subsequent erruptions of unpleasantness, the score moved down three points. The following year, with the school population settled once again, the English score went back up six points, ten points above the score for the year prior to the institution of a phase-elective program. This happened without students having regular doses of what generally has passed as grammar.

Mr. Platt firmly believes that the increase in the score must be attributed to the phase-elective program. Just what part, he is not sure, but perhaps the student involvement, the self-determination. In other words, it does seem that when students participate in making some of their curricular decisions, there may be positive change both in their attitudes toward school and their attainment in school. Hopefully, studies of this kind will help to diminish the obsession some English teachers have for assigning the practically useless drill exercises so predominant in the "grammar" books of the era that should have ended long before now.

Well conceived phase-elective courses place emphasis on producing language, encouraging effective use of language through the motivation that comes from the student's desire to communicate. Any well conceived language arts course should do that.

For all the promises in student plannig via the phase-elective English program, there is a major problem area: scheduling. If the school cannot schedule the program the student has elected, his involvement in planning his program has brought little more than disappointment. A frequent student comment in the evaluation of the elective program is that if they cannot get the courses they sign up for, there is little value in their involvement in planning. In fact, those who have enjoyed the fruits of the elective program express great regret when it does not work out as they have planned. Students do expect the phase-elective program to work as they have been led to believe it will.

Response by 530 students at R. Nelson Snider High School in Fort Wayne to two items in a survey to evaluate scheduling practices of both the school and the students is of significance here.

Question: Why do you favor the phase-elective English program? (Check those applicable)

87% (a) I can take the courses I want to take

54% (b) I can take the courses I need to take

4% (c) I can choose the teacher I want to choose

1% (d) I can choose the period I want to choose

68% (e) Electives are more interesting

27% (f) Teachers seem to enjoy teaching electives more than traditional English courses

1% (g) I don't favor electives; I would rather have traditional English

Question: When choosing an elective, the most important consideration for me is: (Check only one).

33% (a) It is a course I need

55% (b) It is a course I want

0% (c) It is a teacher I want

0% (d) It is a period that I want

6% (e) The phase difficulty

3% (f) To accommodate a work schedule

Mr. David Platt, assistant principal, who conducted the survey, concludes that "the election criteria brought to the election experience is a positive condition on the part of the student and that he seems to positively [sic] expect to receive his request."

Most persons in a school system responsible for scheduling have worked diligently to resolve the problems. Undoubtedly, any school choosing the phase-elective route, especially if course length differs from that of the rest of the programs in the school, will have faced up to the problems and won or lost. One administrator I know suffered a mild heart attack trying to work his way

out from under an overwhelming number of scheduling problems requiring course changes.

Those administrators who are winning the battle are facing up to several realities. They have found that some sort of preenrollment will indicate where student interests lie. A study of the totals for each course will quickly show which courses will be singletons and will cause scheduling problems. The wise scheduler will soon learn how many singletons he can handle in any one schedule period. By proportioning these throughout the school year or even in alternating years, he can retain a rich offering yet eliminate some of his problems. In addition, the schedulers will realize that the number of periods in the school day will either restrain or open the options available to students. Scheduling in a six-period day is far more difficult than in a nine-period day, especially for the academically talented senior who will be requesting an entire program of low frequency classes. Schedulers learn it is best to make the student aware that his priorities in low frequency classes limit his options in phase-elective English rather than let him choose from a wide field and fail to fulfill his schedule.

Those who schedule via the computer have the problem of keeping nine-week courses from dislocating semester courses the second half of the semester. Many link or pair nine-week courses to over-

come this problem and in so doing limit the number of options available. A few schools have adopted arena scheduling or student loading as a solution to scheduling nine-week courses and as a means of allowing the student to revise his priorities on the spot if it becomes necessary.

There are other problems and undoubtedly solutions that I may be unaware of. Perhaps the additional strain placed upon the administration of the phase-elective schools is reassuring in that it would seem to reaffirm the belief that schools are for kids and not for the adults who are charged with operating them. The phase-elective proponents must continue to seek new solutions to the problems, for students seem to have captured a spirit of course election - planning, if you will - that is positive.

Lowell S. Coats
Consultant for English
Fort Wayne Community Schools
Fort Wayne, Indiana
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